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ABSTRACT

This study hypothisized that when a person perceives his social network as constricted, and this constriction has been a "conscious" decision by that individual, then he or she should express little death anxiety. Subjects were 38 individuals who were at least age 60. Of these, 18 were members of the Gray Panthers (with expanding numbers of social contacts), and the remaining 20 were primarily from the Guild House (who could choose their level of social engagement). Materials utilized include Social Lifespace and Perceived Lifespace measures, by Cumming and Henry (1961), Rotter's Internal/External Locus of Control scale (1966), and Templer's death anxiety scale (1970). A Pearson correlation performed on the data revealed that generally, disengagement and low death anxiety are not positively correlated. However, the Gray Panthers showed a significant negative correlation between these variables. There were no significant differences between the two groups. All subjects felt their social networks were either unchanged or slightly decreased since age 45, and that they do exert control over their own lives. They did not express much fear of death. The hypothesis of this study was refuted. The results suggest a possible correlation between high ideals of social involvement and low death anxiety. (Author/JLL)

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DEATH ANXIETY AND DISENGAGEMENT

Pre-dissertation research project
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For the last seventeen years there have been two distinct ways of viewing the process of aging. Proponents of both views have noted that as a person grows older he disengages, that is, there is a decrease in societal involvement, resulting in less interaction between the older person and others in the social system to which he belongs (Neugarten, 1968: Cumming & Henry, 1961). However, the 'activity' theory blames society for the older person's decreased involvement. It states that aging is an uphill affair, that the older person would continue to expand his network of relationships were it not for the natural tendency of the world to withdraw its support. The second theory, called the 'disengagement' theory, holds that decreased involvement with society by the aging person happens because it is desired by both the individual and by society. There is a "severing of ties between a person and others in his society, a reduction in available ego energy and a change in the quality of those ties remaining" (Henry, 1963). 'Disengagement theory' states that there is a reversal of the need for expansion. One chooses to be disengaged, that is, it is not a way to avoid threatening situations nor is it a result of societal rejection from more significant roles (Kuhl n, 1968). Disengagement, according to this theory, is an intrinsic, developmental process and thus follows a predetermined course with positive consequences for the individual.

One of the most contested points of the 'disengagement' theory, as it was originally stated, is the assertion that the optimal pattern for successful aging, in terms of the person's mental health and satisfaction with life, is the gradual and increasing withdrawal by that

person from societal involvement. Though most researchers agree that the process of disengagement does occur, they disagree with Cumming and Henry's (1961) notion that is the right formula for successful adjustment in old age. Havighurst, Neugarten and Tobin (1968) distinguish between social and psychological disengagement. Social disengagement, they say, refers to those decreasing interactions that occur between the oldster and the people he meets in the process of living. Psychological disengagment refers to the extent to which a person is emotionally invested in external events. Havighurst et al. found that psychological disengagement precedes social disengagement and may well be a developmental phenomenon, evidence that the process of disengagement is occurring. However, when life satisfaction was rated, which was defined as contentment with one's present level of activity, the results showed that as activity decreases, so does the older person's sense of well-being. This would seem to refute the assertion that disengagement is necessary in order to maintain a high level of life satisfaction. In another study (Filer & O'Connell, 1962), where the experimental group was involved in a 'useful contributions' climate, there was a significant relationship between meaningful activity and, 1)friendship, 2)socialization, 3)recreation and 4)leisure time adjustment. Kuhlen (1968), in reviewing a 1960 article by Lois Dean, feels that the reported increase in religious interest by her aging subjects is inconsistent with 'disengagement' theory.

Other researchers have voiced different objections to the disengagement theory as the necessary formula for successful aging. Maddox (1968a) argues that the decrease in contact with the environment, which occurs with increasing age, must be interpreted in relation to an individual's own baseline. He feels that his data suggest that a pattern of disengagement is more adequately viewed as the continuing life style of particular individuals. In other articles (Maddox, 1968b; Rose, 1968) there is put forth the opinion that those who believe in Cumming & Henry's theory have a tendency to overlook social and cultural conditions, particularly in the United States. Maddox writes that it is a matter mainly of social fact, not so much of natural inevitability, that the American reaching the age of 65 shifts into a social role of disengagement. Rose writes that in the Israeli kibbutz there is little disengagement of the elderly.

However, some of the same studies which have attempted to refute disengagement as a theory of optimal aging have found that a minority of the sample with which they worked have been characterized as low in activity and yet high in life satisfaction, or vice versa (Maddox, 1965). For a number of subjects, satisfaction scores can be and are maintained in spite of lower activity, particularly interpersonal activity. Others found that life satisfaction does not decrease appreciably with age, that is, the older person regrest the loss of activity (their sense of well-being decreases) and yet they maintain a positive evaluation

of themselves and voice contentment with their past and present life as a whole (Havighurst et al., 1968). Reichard, Livson and Petersen (1968) found that of the behavior patterns of three types of well-adjusted older men, one of the groups, the 'rocking-chair men' seemed to fit the description of the contented, disengaged person. Streib (1968) feels that available evidence indicates that the reasons older people do not avail themselves of voluntary clubs is not because they are denied access to them, but because older people have defined these activities as undesirable. Filer and O'Connell (1962) found that not all of their experimental group (the ones given non-trivial jobs) responded with higher adjustment ratings. They offerred, as a possible explanation for these results, the hypothesis that some persons in this group preferred disengagement and for who this represents the most successful adjustment to the aging process.

Several of the studies attempting to empirically refute disengagement as a procedure for successful aging have serious drawbacks. Havighurst et al. chose to put the measure of 'ego involvement in present life roles', which they define as the extent to which the individual is ego-involved in various life functions, in the category of social disengagement. Had it been designated a measure of psychological disengagement, it would have been additional evidence for Cumming and Henry's theory. Ego investment in present roles begins to decrease around age sisty and therefore it accompanies or even precedes social disengagement.

Thus overall disengagement might be a developmental phenomenon, inherent within the individual.

Filer & O'Connell's (1962) measures of friendship and social adjustment, recreation and leisure time adjustment, work adjustment and personal appearance were devised to measure performance against the societal norms in role areas like worker, citizen, friend and user of free time. However, successful aging was defined as the degree to which a person maintains these various roles, that is, the extent to which he or she remains engaged. Therefore, a subject will get high marks on these scales only when he is like others younger than himself.

Both Cumming (1963) and Henry (1964) subsequently modified their views on the theory they proposed. Cumming wrote that there were individual differences in disengagement and 'typologies of withdrawal and retreat' based on character differences. In these statements she appears to be agreeing with George Maddox. Henry went even further, saying that the process of disengagement does occur, but that "neither theory is sufficient to account for the facts about aging that we now know." He agreed with Cumming in that several styles of aging are possible.

There has been little research done on the relationship between disengagement and the fear of death. Some of the more recent studies have focused on death anxiety as a fear which exists on a conscious

and unconscious level (Schulz, in press; Feifel & Branscomb, 1973). Feifel and Branscomb found that on a conscious level, 71% of the subjects denied fearing death, on a fantasy level 62% answered ambivalently, while on an unconscious level, the results pointed to an overall aversion for death by most of the subjects. Handal and Rychlak (1971) wrote that many of the subjects who had a low score on a death anxiety scale showed a large amount of dream material concerned with death. This, the authors concluded, showed that they were repressing their fear of death. Schulz, in reviewing some of the recent literature on death anxiety, has found that there does seem to be a public, private and non-conscious component to this phenomenon.

Death anxiety has also been measured against demographic and personality factors. There appears to be no significant relationship between fear of death in elderly subjects and variables such as age, sex, employment status, marital status, education, source of income, urban or rural residence or religious persuasion (Osarchuk & Tatz, 1973: Swenson, 1961; Jeffers et al,. 1961; Lester, 1967). Rhudick and Dibner (1961) found that higher death concerns were exhibited by those subjects who scored significantly higher on the MMPI dimensions of hypochondriasis, hysteria, dependency and impulsivity. Diggory and Rothman (1961) wrote that self-esteem was positively correlated with death anxiety, that is, the more a person

values himself, the more fear of death will be exhibited. Templer, Ruff and Franks (1971) found no significant correlation between parents and their children in terms of their scores on a death anxiety measure, though there was substantial correlation between husband and wife. Thus there seems to be a significant relationship between death anxiety and 1)bodily concerns, and 2)satisfaction with self.

One of the areas in which there is a good deal of conflict is in the relationship between religion and fear of death. Swenson (1961) found that persons with more fundamental religious conviction and habits looked forward to death more than those with less fundamental religious beliefs. Fearful attitudes toward death were found in those persons with little religious activity. However Feifel and Branscomb (1973) found that even the religiously inclined person succumbs to death anxiety on the non-conscious level. Yet Jeffers et al (1961) wrote that there was less fear of death in those that often read the Bible. Lester (1967) reported that there was no relation found between death anxiety and belief in God. Schulz' review states that "the degree of religiosity is unrelated to death anxiety for the general population." The conflicting conclusions may be the result of different definitions of religiosity, differnet samples, and differnet measures. Even research on the relationship between belief in an afterlife and death anxiety

has not enabled us to draw any conclusions about these two variables.

The relationship between fear of death and level of activity has not been extensively studied. This subject suffers from a lack of consistency among activity and death anxiety measures. Those studies which have dealt with these two variables have not been able to show significantly that death anxiety decreases as activity (defined as physical and social pursuits like sewing, listening to music, travelling, and card playing) increases (Swenson, 1961; Shrut, 1958). Swenson found that persons indicating a large number of outside interests tend to be actively evasive concerning the subject of death. Shrut, in his study of unmarried, aging, females, concluded that his hypothesis - that death anxiety is negatively correlated to the amount of activity, was not supported by the statistics. Though activity level is not synonymous with the degree of engagement, it is difficult to conceive of an individual whose level of activity is low and yet who can be defined as engaged.

"The disengagement of the aged in modern societies enhances the continuous functioning of socail institutions and permits the changeover of personnel in a planned and careful manner without the inevitably disruptive crises of disorganization and succession that would occur if people worked to the end and died on the job" (Bäuner, 1968).

Another positive consequence of disengagement is that the unfilled

time which the aging person has can be spent reviewing one's past life. Since death must come, disengagement frees the older person to prepare for it, by divesting himself of his functions and relationships. By the end of his or her life disengagement is complete, and "death is the last logical step in the process of living" (Cumming & Henry, 1961). Thus, if an individual is disengaged, and this process comes about because that person desires it, then he or she should experience little death anxiety. The individual may be disengaged because he or she feels that he has little control over his own life, that is, he is powerless to remain engaged. In that case, disengagement is involuntary and should be unrelated to the amount of death anxiety expressed. The hypothesis of this research is that when an individual perceives his social network as constricted or is seen as having few social contacts, and this constriction has been a 'conscious' decision by that person, then he or she should express little death anxiety.

Method:

Subjects: The sample consisted of thirty-eight individuals, all residing in the greater Philadelphia area, and all sixty years of age or older. They were predominantly Christian, though seven of them said they had no religious affiliation. Eighteen of them were members of the Gray Panthers, an organization composed mainly of senior citizens. The Gray Panthers work and organize around

rights for the aging, such as no forced retirement and decent housing for the elderly, though they also involve themselves in national issues such as stopping production of the B-1 bomber. The Gray Panthers were chosen for this project because it was hypothesized that they would be very engaged, that is, they would see their social network as not only maintaining itself, but in fact, expanding, and that they would have a great number of social contacts. The remaining twenty subjects came primarily from the Guild House, a housing project for older persons. Each resident lives in his or her own apartment and is responsible for its upkeep. Members of the Guild House were chosen because it was felt that they could voluntarily choose their level of engagement. Each member was fairly mobile, and could get around as much or as little as they chose. Nursing home residents have their level of engagement, which one would guess is low, chosen for them, and therefore would not have been suitable subjects for this project. None of these subjects were members of the Gray Panthers.

Materials: Two measures of engagement, Social Lifespace and Perceived Lifespace, as devised by Cumming and Henry (1961), Julian Rotter's Internal/External Locus of Control scale (1966), and Donald Templer's (1970) death anxiety scale. The social lifespace measure is derived from an actual count of the number of interactions the individual engages in during a given period. The perceived lifespace measure asks the subject to compare his present rate of interaction

with the one he remembered from the age of forty-five. Rotter's I-E scale was used to measure the extent to which an individual feels he has control over the decisions which affect him, in this case, whether his degree of engagement is of his own choosing.

Procedure: Questionnaires consisting of the four scales were distributed door-to-door at the Guild House and were handed out at meetings of the Gray Panthers. I had met with the social worker at the Guild House and a local leader of the Gray Panthers. They had given their approval to the project and introduced me to the residents and members.

Subjects were asked to fill out the questionnaire and return it to the experimenter in the envelope provided. Each subject was asked to give his or her age, name (optional), and religious preference. The instructions given to each subject included a statement on the importance of answering every question, no matter how vague it might seem. It was necessary to distribute approximately 75 copies of the questionnaire in order to get back 38 which were complete.

Results:

Performing a Pearson correlation on the data led to the conclusion that, in general, disengagement and low death anxiety are not positively correlated. This was the case for the Guild House members, but the Gray Panthers showed a significant negative correlation between these two dependent variables, as can be seen from

Table 1. Perceived lifespace and fear of death were positively correlated for the Guild House, perceived and social lifespace, when contrasted with death anxiety were negatively correlated for the Gray Panthers.

It was also hypothesized that perhaps an older person might be disengaged because he felt powerless to be otherwise. Accordingly, Rotter's I-E measure was controlled for, using a partial correlation. It was found that the significant relationships between perceived lifespace and fear of death for the two groups were maintained (Table 2). Thus, for both groups, the correlations between death anxiety and disengagement do not depend upon the degree to which a person feels he has control over his level of engagement. In addition, when a within group correlation matrix was created, it was found that there were no significant relationships between the two measures (Table 3).

The means and standard deviations of the two groups, as presented in Table 4, showed no significant differences between the Gray Panthers and the Guild House members on any of the four dependent variables. All subjects felt that their social networks were either unchanged or had slightly decreased since they were 45 years old. They were alos found to be persons who feel that they do exert control over their own lifes, and neither group expressed much fear of death.

Discussion:

The results refute the hypothesis that the more one is engaged,

the more one will fear death. It was hoped that there would be significant differences in degree of engagement between the two groups, so as to be able to compare the results to the death anxiety measure, but this was not the case. Both the Gray Panthers and Guild House members had a fair variety and number of social contacts though each saw his own lifespace as either slightly smaller or unchanged since he was 45 years old. However, the Gray Panthers show a negative correlation between death anxiety and degree of engagement, while the Guild House subjects reveal a positive correlation between the change in their lifespace and fear of death. The data suggest that, for the Gray Panthers, the less a member fears death, the more he will tend to see his lifespace as expanding with the passage of time. For a subject living in the Guild House, a decrease in his death anxiety will usually be accompanied by a perceived contraction in his social network. Even when one controls for the amount of influence an aging person feels he has in effecting change in his own life, the relationships between death anxiety and perceived lifespace for the two groups remain significant and almost unchanged.

Therefore, for those aging people who belong to the Gray Panthers, an organization which has continued social involvement for the older person as one of its cheif goals, increasing or maintaining engagement will be accompanied by little fear of death. For those who live by themselves in the Guild House, engagement will be positively related

to an increase in death anxiety. This suggests that one cannot make a profile of the typical older person who experiences little fear of death, since this study reveals that some feel they are still engaged, while others feel somewhat disengaged.

Certain shortcomings of this research should be noted. The social lifespace measure used tends to give high scores to those whose lives have variety. If the subjects had been measured on the length of their interactions, as well as their number, we might see significant differences between the Gray Panthers and the members of the Guild House. In addition, Templer's death anxiety scale taps only the conscious awareness of death anxiety (Schulz, in press). One might uncover more fear of death using those scales which purport to measure this phenomenon at the unconscious and fantasy level.

In conclusion, the results of my research would also suggest that a correlation might exist between high ideals of social involvement and low death anxiety. It may be that for those who join organizations where the goals are major political and social changes, life satisfaction is equated with being involved. When this occurs, one may feel that life has truly been lived to the fullest and death is not seen as a thief of one's opportunities. This might provide a fruitful avenue for further research.

TABLE 1

Gray Panthers	Social Lifespace	Perceived Lifespace	Rotter I-E	Death Anxiety
Social Lifespace	1.0000			
Perceived Lifespace	-.0264	1.0000		
Rotter I-E	-.2767	-.1721	1.0000	
Death Anxiety	-.3238*	-.3938**	.2477	1.000

**p<.053
*p<.10

Guild House	Social Lifespace	Perceived Lifespace	Rotter I-E	Death Anxiety
Social Lifespace	1.0000			
Perceived Lifespace	-.0324	1.0000		
Rotter I-E	.0203	-.1645	1.0000	
Death Anxiety	-.0789	.5456**	-.3760*	

**p<.01
*p<.05

TABLE 2
Partial Correlation Matrix Controlling for Rotter I-E

Gray Panthers	Social Lifespace	Perceived Lifespace	Death Anxiety
Social Lifespace	1.000		
Perceived Lifespace	-.0782	1.000	
Death Anxiety	-.2742	-.3679*	1.000

*p .07

Guild House	Social Lifespace	Perceived Lifespace	Death Anxiety
Social Lifespace	1.000		
Perceived Lifespace	-.0294	1.000	
Death Anxiety	-.0769	*.5293	1.000

*p<.01

TABLE 3
Within Group Correlation Matrix

	Social Lifespace	Perceived Lifespace	Rotter I-E	
Social Lifespace	1.000			
Perceived Lifespace	-.029	1.000		
Rotter I-E	-.129	-.164	1.000	
Death Anxiety	-.191	.174	-.967	1.000

TABLE 4
Means and Standard Deviations of the Gray Panthers and the Guild House

	Social Lifespace	Perceived Lifespace	Rotter I-E	Death Anxiety
Gray Panthers				
Mean	57.61	13.17	8.61	5.56
Standard Deviation	68.79	2.04	3.33	3.20
Guild House				
Mean	63.45	12.85	9.20	6.65
Standard Deviation	69.56	2.68	2.91	3.35

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